

## TRANSCRIPT:

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### Bill Moyers talks with Grace Lee Boggs

**BILL MOYERS:** The woman you're about to meet has also been trying to shake up the status quo in America, but she's been at it a little longer than Andy Stern. About three decades longer. Over a long life, Grace Lee Boggs has tried out one radical idea after another to make America work for everyone. She embraced some, discarded others, fashioned new ones of her own and has remained passionate about trying to humanize our democracy. And through it all, this activist and philosopher has been a witness to tumultuous change even as she kept herself rooted to the place she still calls home.

**BILL MOYERS:** Grace Lee Boggs has lived in this same house in Detroit, Michigan for almost fifty years. That's over half her life.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I warn you, I'm a terrible housekeeper

**BILL MOYERS:** It's a life that's taken her down many roads in the struggle for civil rights. At 91, she's still going strong.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I'm sorry, but I think if we stick to those categories of race, class and gender, we are stuck.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS::** (talking to woman) "Would you send three or four petitions to ..."

**BILL MOYERS:** From the analysis of Karl Marx to the agitation of black power...from Martin Luther King's non-violence to grassroots activism in the inner city, this philosopher activist has never been afraid of change.

Her story begins here in New York City, where she was born to immigrant Chinese parents. During the roaring 20's her father ran a popular Chinese restaurant on Broadway near Times Square. But to buy the land for their first house across the river in Queens, he had to put the deed in the name of an Irish contractor because Asians were prohibited to own land there.

Every week, Grace spent hours at the local library, and won a regents scholarship to Barnard College, earned a Ph.D in philosophy from Bryn Mawr, and would soon be testing her ideas of a good society from the ground up.

I met her recently when she came back to town from Detroit.

**BILL MOYERS:** Is it true that the waiters at your father's Chinese restaurant, when you were born, said, "Take her out and put her on a hillside, she's just a girl?"

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Yes, I attribute some of my activism to that. I think being born female in a Chinese restaurant on top a Chinese restaurant gave me an idea of a lot of things in this world that need to be changed.

**BILL MOYERS:** How did it happen that you came to identify, over the years, far more with the Black American world than with the Chinese American world?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** When I was growing up, Asians were so few and far between, as to be almost invisible. And so the idea of an Asian American movement or an Asian American thrust in this country was unthinkable.

**BILL MOYERS:** What I'm trying to figure out is how it is that a daughter of a Chinese entrepreneur in New York City goes to Bryn Mawr at a very early age, gets her PhD in 1940, before the Second World War, becomes a Marxist theorist, an activist in the Socialist movement, moves on to become an apostle, disciple of Martin Luther King, and here at 91, having outlived all those theories and all those characters and leaders and people, is still agitating for what she calls democracy.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Well, I had no idea what I was gonna do after I got my degree in philosophy in 1940. But what I did know was at that time, if you were a Chinese-American, even department stores wouldn't hire

you. They'd come right out and say, "We don't hire Orientals." And so the idea of my getting a job teaching in a university and so forth was really ridiculous. And I went to Chicago and I got a job in the philosophy library there for \$10 a week, And so I found a little old Jewish woman right near the university who took pity on me and said I could stay in her basement rent-free. The only obstacle was that I had to face down a barricade of rats in order to get into her basement. And at that time, in the black communities, they were beginning to protest and struggle against rat-infested housing. So I joined one of the tenants' organizations and thereby came in touch with the black community for the first time in my life.

**BILL MOYERS:** One of her first heroes in that community was A. Philip Randolph, the charismatic labor leader who had won a long struggle to organize black railroad porters. In the 1930s. on the eve of World War II, Randolph was furious that blacks were being turned away from good paying jobs in the booming defense plants.

When he took his argument to F.D.R., the president was sympathetic but reluctant to act. Proclaiming that quote 'power is the active principle of only the organized masses,' Randolph called for a huge march on Washington to shame the president. It worked. F.D.R. backed down and signed an order banning discrimination in the defense industry. All over America blacks moved from the countryside into the cities to take up jobs — the first time in 400 years — says Grace Lee Boggs, that black men could bring home a regular paycheck.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** And when I saw what a movement could do, I said, "Boy, that's what I wanna do with my life."

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** It was just amazing. I mean, how you have to take advantage of a crisis in the system and in the government and also press to meet the needs of the people who are struggling for dignity. I mean, that's very tricky.

**BILL MOYERS:** It does take moral force to make political decisions possible.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Yeah. and I think that too much of our emphasis on struggle has simply been in terms of confrontation and not enough recognition of how much spiritual and moral force is involved in the people who are struggling.

**BILL MOYERS:** Well, that's true. But power never gives up anything voluntarily. People have to ask for it. They have to demand it. They have-to--

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Well, you know as Douglas said, "Power yields nothing without a struggle." But how one struggles I think is now a very challenging question.

**BILL MOYERS:** She would learn a lot more about struggle from the man she married in 1952 — Jimmy Boggs, a radical activist, organizer, and writer. They couldn't have been outwardly more different — he was a black man, an auto worker and she was a Chinese-American, college educated philosopher — but they were kindred spirits, and their marriage lasted four decades until his death.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I think that I owe a great deal of my rootedness to Jimmy because he learned to write and become a writer because in his illiterate community nobody could read and write. He picked cotton, and then went to work in Detroit. He saw himself as having been part of one epoch, the agriculture epoch, and now the industrial epoch, and now the post-industrial epoch. I think that's a very important part of what we need in this country, is that sense that we have lived through so many stages, and that we are entering into a new stage where we could create something completely different. Jimmy had that feeling.

**BILL MOYERS:** She and Jimmy worked together in the Socialist Workers Party at first, agitating through newsletters and books. They were drawn to the burgeoning Black Power movement — offered Malcolm X a place to stay when he visited Detroit — and argued in any available forum that black power couldn't be worse than white power. Jimmy was drawn into a round of correspondence with the famous British philosopher, Bertrand Russell.

**BILL MOYERS:** Help me understand what Jimmy Boggs meant when he wrote to the philosopher Burton Russell, "Negroes in the United States still think they are struggling for Democracy. In fact, Democracy is what they are struggling against."

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Well, for folks who don't understand, say for example, how the Democratic Party was a coalition of labor and liberals from the North, and people like Eastland and all those Klu Klux Klanners down South--

**BILL MOYERS:** The racist in the South.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** That was American Democracy. People sort create a whole lot of love for it, and all that. Without understanding what the conditions that people were living under, and that that was called democracy.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** And finally, fortunately, we broke through that in the '60s.

**BILL MOYERS:** But that breakthrough came only with great pain.

In the summer of 1967, a police raid in Detroit exploded into violence. Fires raged across the city, including in the Boggs neighborhood. President Johnson called out the U.S. Army, and the nation watched on television, horrified as the city burned. The press called it a violent spasm of riot and lawlessness.

But Grace Lee Boggs saw something in those flames that many outsiders missed. Her beloved neighborhood was suffering the slow bleed of manufacturing jobs from the city, and an unemployment rate double that of whites.

**BILL MOYERS:** Let me take you back to that terrible summer of 1967, when Detroit erupted into that awful riot out there.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I ask you to think about your calling it a riot.

**BILL MOYERS:** What would you call it?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** We in Detroit called it the rebellion.

**BILL MOYERS:** The rebellion?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** And because we understand that there was a righteousness about the young people rising up — it was a rising up, it was a standing up, by young people.

**BILL MOYERS:** Against?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Against both the police, which they considered an occupation army, and against what they sensed had become their expendability because of high-tech. That what black people had been valued for, for hundreds of years, only for their labor, was now being taken away from them.

**BILL MOYERS:** And you think that this question of work was at the heart of what happened-- or it was part of what happened in Detroit that summer?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I don't think it's that they were conscious of it, but I thought-- what I saw happen was that young people who recognized that working in the factory was what had allowed their parents to buy a house, to raise a family, to get married, to send their kids to school, that was eroding. They felt that-- no one cares anymore.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** And what we tried to do is explain that a rebellion is righteous, because it's the protest by a people against injustice, because of unrighteous situation, but it's not enough. You have to go beyond rebellion. And it was amazing, a turning point in my life, because until that time, I had not made a distinction between a rebellion and revolution. And it forced us to begin thinking, what does a revolution mean? How does it relate to evolution?

**BILL MOYERS:** The violence in Detroit brought some new thinking about a strategy for change. After seeing how anger and frustration could turn so quickly into chaos, Boggs began to take a closer look at the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr.

She had been slow to appreciate King's spiritual journey or his belief in non-violence. But now she discovered that King, too, was wrestling with how to go beyond the civil rights movement to a profound transformation of society.

By this point, King had realized it wasn't enough just to end racial segregation in the south. In the spring of 1967, he came to New York's historic Riverside Church to challenge inequality throughout America — and to link conditions at home to the nation's war in Southeast Asia.

**MARTIN LUTHER KING:** I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes

at home and death and corruption in Vietnam... The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours.

**BILL MOYERS:** The conundrum for me is this; The war in Vietnam continued another seven years after Martin Luther King's great speech at Riverside here in New York City on April 4th, 1967. His moral argument did not take hold with the powers-that-be.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I don't expect moral arguments to take hold with the powers-that-be. They are in their positions of power. They are part of the system. They are part of the problem.

**BILL MOYERS:** Then do moral arguments have any force if they--

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Of course they do.

**BILL MOYERS:** If they can be so heedlessly ignored?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I think because we depend too much on the government to do it. I think we're not looking sufficiently at what is happening at the grassroots in the country. We have not emphasized sufficiently the cultural revolution that we have to make among ourselves in order to force the government to do differently. Things do not start with governments--

**BILL MOYERS:** But wars do.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** There's big changes--

**BILL MOYERS:** Wars do. Wars do.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Wars do. But positive changes leaps forward in the evolution of human kind, do not start with governments. I think that's what the Civil Rights Movement taught us.

**BILL MOYERS:** But Martin Luther King was ignored then on the war. In fact, the last few years of his life, as he was moving beyond the protest in the South, and the end of official segregation, he was largely ignored if not ridiculed for his position on economic equality. Upon doing something about poverty. And, in fact, many civil rights leaders, as you remember, Grace, condemned him for mixing foreign policy with civil rights. They said; That's not what we should be about.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** But see, what I hear in what you're saying is a separation of the anti-war speech of the peace trajectory, from the other things that Martin said. He was talking about a radical revolution of values. And that radical revolution of values has not been pursued in the last forty years. The consumerism, and materialism, has gotten worse. The militarism has continued, while people are going around, you know just using their credit cards. All that's been taking place. And so, would he have continued to challenge those? I think he would. But on the whole, our society has not been challenging those, except in small pockets.

**BILL MOYERS:** He said that the three triplets of society in America were; Racism, consumerism or materialism and militarism. And you're saying those haven't changed.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I'm saying that not only have those not changed, but people have isolated the struggles against each of these from the other. They have not seen that they're part of one whole of a radical revolution of values that we all must undergo.

**BILL MOYERS:** Whose failing is that?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I'm not sure I would use the word 'failing.' I would say that people who have engaged in one struggle tend to be locked into that struggle.

**BILL MOYERS:** When you look back, who do you think was closer to the truth? Karl Marx or Martin Luther King? The truth about human society.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** King was an extraordinary thinker. He understood — he read Marx. He was serious about reading Marx. He was also serious about reading Hegel, about reading Gandhi, about the Bible, Jesus Christ and Christianity. So Marx belongs to a particular period. I think that the anti-Marxist King was not an anti-Marxist. He was a man of his time.

**BILL MOYERS:** I've often wondered, Grace, if Martin Luther King would have been more effective, if he'd been slightly more radical.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** First of all, I find it difficult to understand what "more radical" means.

**BILL MOYERS:** If he had challenged the system more, the interlocking relationship between power, both in the economy and power in Washington.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** You know, Bill, to develop your ideas to meet the crisis that you're faced with, takes time. King, from '65 August to April 1968, only had three years, and he was moving very fast. It takes time. what we need to do is not to fault him for not having done in the few years that he had. What we need to do now, we need to build on what he did. That's what the movement's about, building on what you learned from the past.

**BILL MOYERS:** Yes, but where is the sign of the movement today?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I believe that we are at the point now, in the United States, where a movement is beginning to emerge. I think that the calamity, the quagmire of the Iraq war, the outsourcing of jobs, the drop-out of young people from the education system, the monstrous growth of the prison-industrial complex, the planetary emergency, which we are engulfed at the present moment, is demanding that instead of just complaining about these things, instead of just protesting about these things, we begin to look for, and hope for, another way of living. And I think that's where the movement -- I see a movement beginning to emerge, 'cause I see hope beginning to trump despair.

**BILL MOYERS:** Where do you see the signs of it?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I see the signs in the various small groups that are emerging all over the place to try and regain our humanity in very practical ways. For example in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Will Allen, who is a former basketball player has purchased two and a half acres of land, with five greenhouses on it, and he is beginning to grow food, healthy food for his community. And communities are growing up around that idea. I mean, that's a huge change in the way that we think of the city. I mean, the things we have to restore are so elemental. Not just food, and not just healthy food, but a different way of relating to time and history and to the earth.

**BILL MOYERS:** And a garden does that for you?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Yes. A garden does all sorts of things. It helps young people to relate to the Earth in a different way. It helps them to relate to their elders in a different way. It helps them to think of time in a different way.

**BILL MOYERS:** How so?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Well, if we just press a button, and you think that's the key to reality, you're in a hell of a mess of a human being.

**BILL MOYERS:** So it is that this woman who marched and agitated and argued in mass movements and social protests for over 70 years...has come full circle...to find seeds of hope in small places where people work quietly and patiently on every imaginable front.

**Man # 1:** We work on trying to change policies for homeless people.

**Man # 2:** I think information is power

**BILL MOYERS:** They get little public attention....although they're concerned with the most basic human needs...

**Man # 3:** We want jobs that actually empower us, you know, and make it so that you actually have a say in what happens at your workplace.

**BILL MOYERS:** These days, Boggs works through what's known as the Beloved Community Initiative to encourage people like this in cities across the country to see themselves as crucial to how democracy works. And for whom.

**BILL MOYERS:** You know, you didn't have to come here this past weekend. You're 91 years old. Why did you come?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Because I think the initiative that I am part of, the beloved communities initiative, is

identifying and helping to bring together small groups who are making this cultural revolution that we so urgently need in our country.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** And I see this as part of a pilgrimage which human beings have been embarked on for thousands and tens of thousands of years. People think of evolution mainly in terms of anatomical changes. I think that we have to think of evolution in terms of very elemental human changes. And so, we're evolving both through our knowledge and through our experiences to another stage of humankind. So, revolution and evolution are no longer so separate.

**BILL MOYERS:** But the economic system doesn't reflect this evolution. Outsourcing of jobs, the flight of capital, the power of capital over workers. All of that has-- the system isn't catching up this.

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Well, just don't expect the system to catch up, the system is part of the system! What I think is that, not since the 30s have American-- have the American people, the ordinary Americans faced such uncertainty with regard to the economic system. In the 30s, what we did, was we confronted management and were able, thereby to gain many advantages, particularly to gain a respect for the dignity of labor. That's no longer possible today, because of the ability of corporations to fly all over the place and begin setting up-- all this outsourcing. So, we're gonna have - people are finding other ways to regain control over the way they make their living.

**BILL MOYERS:** You know, a lot of young people out there would agree with your analysis. With your diagnosis. And then they will say; What can I do that's practical? How do I make the difference that Grace Lee Boggs is taking about. What would you be doing?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I would say do something local. Do something real, however, small. And don't diss the political things, but understand their limitations.

**BILL MOYERS:** Don't 'diss' them?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Disrespect them.

**BILL MOYERS:** Disrespect them?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** Understand their limitations. Politics — there was a time when we believed that if we just achieved political power it would solve all our problems. And I think what we learned from experiences of the Russian Revolution, all those revolutions, that those who become-- who try to get power in the state, become part of the state. They become locked in to the practices. And we have to begin creating new practices.

**BILL MOYERS:** What will it take for this next round of change that you see as promising? What would it take?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** It takes discussions like this. I mean, it takes a whole lot of things. It takes people doing things. It takes people talking about things. It takes dialogue. It takes changing the whole lot of ways by which we think.

**BILL MOYERS:** Do you see any leaders who are advocating that change? I mean, people that we would all recognize, anybody we'd all recognize?

**GRACE LEE BOGGS:** I don't see any leaders, and I think we have to rethink the concept of "leader." 'Cause "leader" implies "follower." And, so many-- not so many, but I think we need to appropriate, embrace the idea that we are the leaders we've been looking for.

**BILL MOYERS:** Grace Lee Boggs, thank you very much.